

VZCZCXRO7972

RR RUEHAG RUEHAST RUEHDA RUEHDF RUEHFL RUEHIK RUEHKW RUEHLA RUEHLN
RUEHLZ RUEHPOD RUEHROV RUEHSR RUEHVK RUEHYG
DE RUEHTI #1070/01 3551505
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 211505Z DEC 07
FM AMEMBASSY TIRANA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 6486
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 TIRANA 001070

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR EUR/SCE

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [ECON](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SOCI](#) [AL](#)

SUBJECT: THIS WEEK IN ALBANIA, DECEMBER 15 - 21, 2007

¶1. (U) The following is a weekly report prepared by Embassy Tirana's local staff to provide political and economic context and insight into developments in Albania. These updates will supplement post's DAR reports and reporting cables.

POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENTS

¶2. (U) ALBANIAN PROPERTY CLAIMANTS SET THEIR HOPES ON STRASBOURG:
On December 18, the European Court for Human Rights (ECHR) in Strasbourg ruled in favor of an American-Albanian citizen named Marini over a property dispute claim he filed with the court against the GOA. The court found against the government for failing to implement prior domestic court decisions and fined the GOA USD 480,000. The verdict was a victory for Marini, who had waged a 14 year-long fight with various state institutions over an abrogated commercial partnership he entered into with the government in the early 1990s. Marini's was the fourth case involving property disputes brought by Albanian citizens to be heard by the ECHR. All four decisions have gone against the GOA; total compensation and penalties exceed USD 2 million. To date, almost 200 Albanian citizens have filed suit with the ECHR in Strasbourg against the GOA over property claims. (Note: It is not yet known whether the GOA has paid any of the four winning claimants.)

¶3. (U) Property restitution and the enforcement of court decisions are two of the most serious problems that have afflicted Albanian society during the post-communist transition period. Large-scale property confiscation during communist rule and the subsequent nationalization of the economy completely altered Albania's economic landscape. Competing property claims, an over-burdened state administrative process for adjudicating claims and a lack of financial resources to compensate property owners all make the issue difficult to correct. Property restitution and compensation have progressed slowly, generating a lot of corruption and social tension in the process. It is estimated that almost 70 percent of all civil cases in the Albanian courts involve property disputes; most of these cases linger for years before reaching a final ruling.

¶4. (U) The property restitution issue has gained political momentum in recent years as increased public attention has put pressure on the government to act. While the restitution of confiscated property might be completed in the nearer term, property compensation remains a distant dream, with some estimates putting total compensation at approximately USD 5 billion. The recent decisions by the ECHR have ratcheted up pressure on the GOA to finally resolve this long-running national headache.

¶5. (U) ELECTORAL SYSTEM PROPOSAL THREATENS SMALL PARTIES' SURVIVAL:
The electoral reform debate took a new turn this week when the Socialist Movement for Integration (LSI), the second largest opposition party, proposed the adoption of a pure proportional electoral system. This would be a positive step toward eliminating the "horse-trading" for votes from one party to another that currently takes place in parliamentary elections. (Note: Forty of the 140 seats in Parliament are elected under a proportional

representational scheme that was originally designed to protect minority rights. In practice, most of the 13 parties in Parliament are one- and two-member parties whose constantly shifting loyalties contribute to Parliament's political gridlock.)

16. (U) Under the LSI proposal, voters would vote only for one political party and parties would publish their list of candidates for Members of Parliament. LSI pointed out that this proposal would not only allow all political parties to compete equally, but it would also solve other issues, such as improving the gender imbalance in Parliament. This proposal petrified the other small political parties, as its adoption could cost most of them their parliamentary representation. While discussion over electoral reform continues, the two main parties have recognized that there is increased urgency to reach an agreement ahead of the NATO summit next year. The adoption of a pure representational system would, for the first time in 16 years of Albanian democracy, demonstrate the real representation of the existing political parties across the country.

"O Lord, help me to be pure, but not yet."
Saint Augustine

17. (U) KOSOVAR SINGERS RATTLE ALBANIA'S MUSICAL SCENE, BUT NOT THE JURY: Albania's cultural scene was engulfed last week by a heated controversy over the winner of the annual song festival that represents Albania in the EuroSong competition. While allegations about flawed voting procedures have plagued this festival in the past, the controversy this year took nationalistic tones as allegations surrounded a song that featured two girls from Kosovo. Two members of the jury, a well known Albanian film producer and a young singer, aroused heated public debates with their decision to give zero points to the two Kosovar girls' song and push forward another song that was trailing behind in second place. The votes by the two members of the song jury guaranteed that the winner was a

TIRANA 00001070 002 OF 002

sixteen-year-old making her first appearance on the national stage. The two jury members insisted that their votes were based on their musical preference and had no ethnic undertones. However, many observers are having a hard time understanding how a song that was considered the best by the majority of the jury failed to get a single point in their votes. With the coming EuroSong festival set to take place in Serbia, speculation abounded that the jury members failed to support a song sung by Kosovar Albanians to avoid any controversy in Belgrade. With the debate set to continue over the coming weeks, this year's contest highlighted the lingering importance of the national music festival that first started in 1962 and continues to play an important role in Albanian contemporary music across all Albanian inhabited territories. You can listen to both songs in youtube: winner
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T4kIiwQfUkU> Second place:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uPC6sW8rVnc>

18. (U) The Festival i Kenges was the premier music event during the communist period and was strictly controlled by the Party to ensure compliance with "socialist art principles." With the communist government's intention to preserve its hold on the country's cultural life, many who failed to live up to the party's artistic standards ended up in prison. While the festival continued to play an important role after the fall of communism, its influence diminished as new musical events made their debut in the public scene. Since 2003, however, the festival has garnered greater attention (and controversy) as it is the venue that selects Albania's song for the European EuroSong contest.

19. (U) HOLIDAY SEASON IN ALBANIA: Albanians have great respect for family values. So whenever they decide to celebrate, they do it together with their entire family. Albania has a mix of Christian and Muslim populations. Although New Year's Eve is the most celebrated national holiday, Christmas is also greatly celebrated. The tradition of gift giving is maintained through New Year's Eve. It originates from the communist era in Albania when religion was prohibited - i.e. a Christmas tree was called a New Year's tree, Santa Claus was called New Year's Grandpa, etc. Feasting takes a prominent place during the Christmas season in Albania. Like in the

U.S., almost all families prepare special meals for their Christmas or New Year's dinner. Typical food includes turkey, stuffing, Russian salad and different side dishes. And the Christmas desert takes a special place. Albanians call it "bakllava" which in America is known as "baklavash." It's like a pie, but far more complicated, featuring primarily nuts. And it's delicious. Albanians also mark Christmas by putting up a big and brightly decorated Christmas tree in the center of the capital, which is enjoyed by people of all traditions.

WITHERS